

SERIAL STORY

The Sable Lorcha

BY

Horace Hazeltine

(Copyright, 1912, A. C. McClurg & Co.)

SYNOPSIS.

Robert Cameron, capitalist, consults Philip Clyde, newspaper publisher, regarding anonymous threatening letters he has received. The first promises a sample of the writer's power on a certain day. On that day the head is mysteriously cut from a portrait of Cameron while the latter is in the room.

INSTALLMENT 3

CHAPTER II.

Rifle Shots Echo in the Woods. Of conveying even a tinge of the horror I experienced at Cameron's disclosure I am high hopeless. The more we discussed the occurrence the less susceptible it seemed of explanation. And what is so terrifying as the inexplicable, or so dreadful as the intangible? Here, apparently, was an enemy of calm and cunning malignity, who chose to manifest his power in a manner almost ludicrously puerile—save as it pointed with significant finger to some dire and inevitable sequel—yet with such crafty secrecy as completely to mystify and dismay.

Cameron showed me the mutilated portrait. He had taken it down almost immediately, and had hidden it away in a closet of the hall behind a array of raincoats. The cutting had been done, evidently, with an exceedingly keen blade, and very dexterously done. But that it should have been accomplished in twelve minutes, while Cameron sat in the room, not fifteen feet distant, was beyond our comprehension. Absorption in his book was the nearest we came to a solution, and that was scarcely tenable. For there was the crowded top of the bookshelves. To cut the canvas, the vandal must either have stood upon that or have reared a ladder. There was not room for the foot of a child on the shelf-top; and as for the ladder, it was unthinkable. How could a ladder have been carried in and out without Cameron being conscious of it? From every possible angle we viewed the incident, making every conceivable concession, and no half-way plausible answer to the riddle presented itself. And though our common-sense told us that the time of miracles was long past, that no Gyges' ring, nor Alberich's cloak survived to this day to make invisible their wearers, there persisted, nevertheless, a chill, uncanny sense of the supernatural, quite evident to me in Cameron's husky voice and furtive manner, and in my own unwonted nervous disquietude.

We sat very late. I wished, if possible, to learn if at any time in my friend's life he had done ought to engender an enmity to which these strange developments could be traced—whether, for instance, in the hot blood of his youth in some far land he had provoked the vengeance of one whose humor it is never to forget. As we talked I came to know Cameron better than I had ever known him before. He bared to me much of his early career; he gave me a clearer view of his temperamental qualities; and yet I could not but feel that he left the vital point untouched, that beneath his seeming frankness there lay hidden, shielded, some one episode, perhaps, which might let the light in upon our dark case. For my question was evaded rather than answered.

Presently, we went back to the letters and dissected them, coldly and critically, sentence by sentence, and while the weird influence which they had exerted upon me at the first reading increased, stimulated possibly by the incident of the portrait, still we reached a certain practical, common-sense view as to their origin; for we came to see in them what we believed to be the hand of a religious fanatic. Certain expressions, we concluded, were quotations. If they were not Biblical, they were certainly of sacred genesis. And the discovery was not reassuring. It lent, indeed, an added prick to the perturbation we already experienced.

Nor did the absence of a specified date for the second promised demonstration of power tend to relieve our uneasiness. In this silence we found the acme of cunning cruelty. Any day at any hour, some other mystifying, soul-torturing incident was liable to occur.

I tried to argue that the seventh day

was implied, inasmuch as the second note was received on the same day of the month as the first, and was a mere continuation of the original threat. But my contention lacked the intrinsic strength which carries conviction, and, as Cameron put it, we could only "watch and wait;" for the communications offered no alternative. They made no demand which being complied with would avert penalty. Only irrefragable and inevitable retribution, calm, patient, and determined, effused from every line.

But, in spite of Cameron's evident anxiety—and in using that term I am very mildly stating his obvious condition of mind—he sternly refused to consult either the police or the private detectives.

"You may not know," he explained, "that I am largely interested in a certain line of industrial enterprises, the shares of which are listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Should the public become aware that my life is threatened, very serious consequences might ensue in the market. No, Clyde, whatever is done, must be done by ourselves, and by friends whom we can trust absolutely. I can take no risk of this horrid thing getting into the newspapers. Besides," he added, with a kindly, considerate smile, "Evelyn must be kept in ignorance. Not for worlds would I have her troubled by our perplexing enigma."

My suggestion that he should go abroad for a time, or at least spend a few weeks at Newport, was met with similar obstinate refusal.

"I admit that I have been somewhat upset by this extraordinary combination," was the way he expressed it, "but I am not a coward. I am not going to run. Even if I were inclined to do so, what should I gain? If a man be not safe in his own house, where in Heaven's name is he likely to find safety?"

Quite naturally I was led by this expression to inquire whether, perchance, he mistrusted any of the many persons who were employed in the house and about the estate. But, somewhat to my surprise, he was almost gravely offended by the mere suggestion. Nevertheless there were several features of the affair, chief of them the manner in which the letters were received, which caused me to dwell with some mental persistence on this as the most profitable ground for speculation. And when at length, in the morning's small hours, I returned to my home and to my bed, I carried the thought with me.

The sowing of this seed in the subconscious garden of my mind brought forth fruit after its kind. I awoke with a perfectly clear understanding of how that which, the night before, had seemed so impossible of accomplishment was, perhaps, after all, merely a harlequin trick, quite simple when explained.

With the new day, too, and the sunlight, and the cheery brightness of my own rooms, there came a lifting of that oppressive atmosphere of the esoteric which at Cameron's had set my nerves out of plumb and my reason on the bias. Indeed I was fully convinced that we had been foolishly constructing an Alpine chain out of a miserable little row of mole hills, and I determined to lose no time in bringing Cameron, whom I now regarded as most needlessly alarmed, to my own wholesome way of thinking.

Directly after breakfast, therefore, I set forth on foot for my neighbor's, choosing the shore road as the more direct of the two routes.

Personally, my taste in landscape is for distant view in preference to near-at-hand foliage. My own house, which is fashioned in semblance of a Pompeian villa, its cream-white walls punctuated with shutters of a somewhat vivid peagreen and crowned by gently sloping roofs of the same bright color, gazes out across Stamford Harbor and the blue waters of the Sound, to where on clear days the pencilled outline of Eaton's Neck shows purple in the distance. There are no towering, umbrageous trees to interrupt the outlook, only low, carefully-trimmed shrubs, adorning a series of marble sculpture-dotted terraces, well below the line of vision. But the Cameron place, reflecting the Townsburys' penchant for arboriculture, is quite the reverse. The prospect from the windows and verandahs of the fine old mansion is all green vistas and leafy perspectives, with only a glint of sun-sparkled waves, chance-caught between gray boles or when the wind spreads a momentary opening in the foliage.

My way to Cameron's led through a veritable forest of such luxuriant leafage that the path more than half the time was in twilight, while to right and left the shadows deepened into dark in the cloistral recesses of the woodland heart. The silence was profound. No voice of bird nor scurrying foot of squirrel invaded the morning hush of those ramous depths. My own footsteps on the soft turf returned no sound.

A half-mile or more I had walked in this mute greenwood peace, when sharp and clear there echoed through the verdurous aisles the crack of a rifle, and I came to a sudden, involuntary halt.

Then it occurred to me that it was the

third day of the open season for rail birds, and that it was the report of a shot-gun I had heard, fired by some sportsman, off on the shore, there, to my right. And so I resumed my tramp, with ears keen for a repetition. Almost immediately I was rewarded, and then I knew that it was no rail bird gunner, for the shot was unmistakably a rifle shot, and it was fired in the depth of the wood, to the left of me.

Three times more I heard it, in fairly rapid succession, and sounding always from about the same direction. I cannot say that it gave me any uneasiness, but it perplexed me in a mild way, arousing a passing curiosity as to its object. And then, I came out upon the well-kept, gravelled drive which circles the close-cropped, velvety Cameron lawn, and catching sight of Cameron himself, in riding breeches and puttees, romping with one of his picturesquely graceful Russian wolf-hounds, promptly forgot all about it.

He came across the sward to meet me, the great, gaunt white hound pressing close to his side, and I thought I saw that he, too, had experienced the inspiring influence of the morning.

"I have found an answer," I cried, while he was still fifty yards away, "possibly the answer."

He raised his brows in question, and the hound, with open jaws, fondled his wrist.

"I had a horseback ride before breakfast," he told me, as he shook my hand. "Then I spent an hour at the kennels. We've a fine new brood of collie puppies. You must see them."

"I want to," I returned.

"What do you say to tennis?" he suggested, irrelevantly. "Just a set. It's a fine morning for tennis."

"If you can lend me a pair of shoes," I consented, glancing down at my boots.

"A dozen pairs," he smiled. "Come up to my dressing room. Love will fit you out."

I was scarcely prepared for this change in my friend's mood, and far from happy over it. He was evidently determined to ignore the subject that had so engrossed us the night before, hoping to find surcease of harassing thought in a restless round of activities. The condition was a morbid one which I believed should be discouraged; the more so as I possessed what I fancied was a perfectly practical solution of that which hitherto had seemed to us an inexplicable phenomenon. And I was a little annoyed, too, that my good tidings should be thus disregarded.

When, therefore, we had entered the hall and Cameron was leading towards the broad, ascending staircase, I paused.

"Do you mind giving me just a minute?"

He stopped, turned, and stood in questioning silence.

"A minute in your study," I added, in explanation.

Reluctantly, it seemed to me, he crossed to the study door, and throwing it open, stood aside that I might precede him.

The room appeared far less grim and gloomy than when I had last entered it. Its windows faced the south; and between the olive-green tapestry curtains the sun poured in a flood, lighting up the far corners, glinting on the ornaments of the writing table, and bathing in dazzling splendor the burnished bronzes on the crowded top of the bookshelves.

"I see you are not disposed to resume our discussion of last night," I began, when Cameron, having closed the door behind him, halted just inside, and with hands in pockets, awaited my opening. "But I want to show you that we have been in very much the same position as the wandering children who watch the prestidigitateur. We have imagined something amazingly like a miracle, which, in point of fact, is capable of a very simple, commonplace explanation."

"You mean the cutting out of the head of the portrait?" he asked, with kindling interest.

"I do."

"You have discovered how it was done, before my eyes, so to speak, and yet—?"

"I have discovered how it may have been done," I interrupted.

He moved his head just perceptibly from side to side in skeptical gesture.

"The door of this room is seldom locked?" I queried, ignoring the indicated skepticism.

"Never locked," he answered.

"It would be quite possible for any one, knowing that you were absent, to spend an hour or so here, uninterrupted?"

"Any one?" he questioned.

"Any one who had gained entrance to the house," I amplified.

"Oh, yes, I presume so."

"They would have ample time to clear a space on the bookshelves, climb up, and carefully cut out the head, or any part, or the whole of a portrait, if they were so inclined?"

I paused for his answer, but he only smiled with a sort of incredulous tolerance.

"Would they not?" I insisted. But Cameron was most perverse this morning.

"My dear Clyde," he scoffed, "of what use is all this? The portrait was

cut, not while I was absent, but while I was present. I saw it complete at three o'clock; at twelve minutes past three, it was mutilated."

"My contention is," I explained, quite patiently, "that while you saw it complete at three o'clock, the cut had already been made, but the cut portion had not been removed. In other words, the cutting having been deftly done with a thin, sharp knife, it was perfectly feasible to leave the portrait apparently intact, though with the slightest effort the incised portion could subsequently be released—with, say, a piece of cord, glued to the back for that especial purpose."

Now that I had made myself clear, Cameron was quick to acknowledge the possibility of such a method.

"And the cord, you mean, led down behind the bookshelves, and perhaps through a window?" he suggested.

"Precisely. And was pulled by some one on the outside."

"Yes," he said, thoughtfully. "Such an explanation is not unreasonable. The thing, really, must have been done in some such way."

"And don't you see," I hurried on with my advantage, "how utterly cheap this makes the whole affair? There's nothing at all impressive in that performance when you find out how it was done. If the next demonstration is no better than such claptrap, you may rest assured you have a very picayunish sort of mountebank villain to deal with. So, cheer up, my dear man, and I'll show you a few tricks at tennis that may be equally eye-opening."

Unquestionably my friend appeared relieved. But I came to fancy later that the appearance was feigned for my benefit. Certainly he was not convinced, and in that proved himself possessed of an intuition, a world more accurate than my own.

CHAPTER III.

The Target.

The set at tennis having finished with victory perching on my banners, I made excuse to put off the inspection of the collie puppies until another time, resumed my walking boots and, with a parting if futile admonition to Cameron to "think no more about it," started on my homeward way.

My route lay again through the miniature forest, for the day had waxed uncomfortably warm with the approach of noon, and there was scant shade on the high-road between our two houses. In the wood, however, the air was gratefully cool, and I strode on at a good pace, breathing deeply and with enjoyment the bosky odors which greeted me afresh at every step.

The dead silence which I had remarked earlier was broken now by the hoarse tooting of a steamboat whistle, somewhere off shore, and by the shrill voices of birds, apparently in resentful protest at this raucous invasion of their sylvan quiet.

I had succeeded in putting aside, for the moment at least, all thought of Cameron, his anonymous letters, and his mutilated portrait, and was dwelling on my disappointment at not having caught even so much as a glimpse of Evelyn Grayson during my morning visit to Cragholt. It is true that I had gone there with a single purpose in mind—to convey to Cameron what I believed to be an important theory—but underlying this, I realized now, was more than a hope, a confidence even, that I should see Evelyn. I was tempted, indeed, to a regret that I had not waited, visited the kennels, and accepted Cameron's invitation for luncheon, which would doubtless have insured me a few words at least with my Goddess of Youth.

While on the verge of this self-reproach my spirits suddenly lifted, for the steam whistle having died away in the distance and the feathered choristers having relapsed into a pleased chirp that merely accented the stillness, there broke all at once on the mute calm of the woodland the silver sweetness of a girl's singing. Clear and resonant it rang through the forest aisles; a voice I knew beyond mistaking. Evelyn Grayson was coming towards me over the scented turf. Still hidden by a bend in the path, the melody alone measured for me her approach. It was a French chanson she was singing, a lyric of Baudelaire's, of which we were both fond.

Sweet music sweeps me like the sea
Toward my port-star,
Whether the sea be there or all the
air be free,
I sail afar.

And then she came around the turn. At first she did not see me, for her eyes were lifted with her voice, and I had time to mark the fascinating grace of her long, free stride, before she became conscious of my presence and checked and shortened it. She wore a frock of white serge, the skirt's edge at her ankles, revealing dainty, snowy buckskin ties and just a sweep of white silk hose. And her flower-like face looked out through a frame of leghorn straw and pink roses, tied snugly beneath her softly rounded chin with the flimsiest of long, floating white veils. You can imagine the picture she made, there in this green glade, with her big blue eyes alight with glad surprise, and the

warm blood suddenly risen in her cheeks.

"You truant!" I cried, in jocular reprimand. "Are you always going to run away when I visit Cragholt?"

She pouted prettily. I detect a woman who pouts, ordinarily. There is usually such palpable affection about it. But Evelyn's pouting was winsome as an infant's. Besides it was only momentary. Then her eyes flashed and her foot was planted very hard, for such a tiny thing, on the green grass blades.

"I'm not a truant," she declared, with feigned indignation, "and I never thought of running away. That's just your concocted manly imagination. You fancy that everything I do can have but one cause, and that is yourself. How, pray, was I to know you intended paying us a morning call?"

"Tut, tut," I caught her up. "What a little spitfire we have here! If you hadn't deserted me so shamefully last evening, I shouldn't have minded this morning, so much. As it is, it seems aeons since I saw you."

Now she smiled until her dimples nestled. "That is much better," she returned, gayly, "and deserves a reply, just as my action of last evening deserves praise, and not rebuke. I sacrificed myself and my pleasure for one I love."

"Not for me, surely!"

"Did I use the word conceit a moment ago? Are you the only man I love?"

"I hope so," I answered, impudently.

"There is another," she confessed, in mock tragedy. "Behold his face!"

I had not noticed that she held a little roll in her hand, for my eyes had been ever on hers; so, when abruptly, she spread out and held before me the missing head from Cameron's portrait, I was doubly unprepared. I know I was startled. She said afterwards that I went very white. I suppose I did; for with the rush of realization came such a chain of supposition as to drive me momentarily dizzy. For a second or more I stood dumb, while my hand went out in eager reach for the scrap of canvas, which, I had observed, instantaneously, bore four perforations, all of a size—the size of a rifle bullet. With that discovery had recurred the shots I had heard; and following this, came a maze of conjecture, going back to that first letter, then to the painting's mutilation, and on through devious ways to the morning's target practice; and always with one or another of Cameron's trusted servants as the chief actor.

When I recovered my composure I found Evelyn backing wilfully away from my covetous hand.

"It is the picture of the man I love," she was saying, teasingly. "A very, very good man."

"But where did you get it?" I asked seriously. "Do you know where it came from?"

Suddenly she was as grave as I could wish.

"I found it nailed to a tree," she answered. "Wasn't it odd? How do you suppose it came there? It looks like the portrait that hung in Uncle Robert's study. Do you suppose he grew to dislike it, and cut it up and threw it away?"

Now I found myself in some little embarrassment. If I was to obey Cameron's injunction I could not tell Evelyn the truth. Yet I was in no position to make light of her find. On the other hand I must learn from her just where she had come upon it, and so trace, if possible, the person who had fired the shots which riddled it.

"My dear girl," I said, adopting a tone of cajolery, "we have here, I think, a matter in which we both can be of service—very valuable service, indeed, to that beloved uncle and guardian of yours. But, you must trust me, absolutely, and, for the present at least, you must give to him no hint of what we have in hand. Do you understand?"

She laughed in that merry rippling fashion which I had found not the least of her charms.

"Do I understand?" she repeated, laying a hand on my arm in emphasis of her amused tolerance. "Do I understand? Of course I don't, and I shan't, until you have answered at least a half-dozen whys and whats."

"But you must trust me," I insisted, "and as primary evidence of that trust you will proceed at once to hand over to me, for examination, that somewhat damaged piece of portraiture which you are holding behind you."

Very wide her eyes opened in an innocent, almost infantile stare, as she asked:

"Do you really mean it, Philip?"

"Really," I answered, gravely. "I'd like to tell you all about it, right here and now, but that might spoil everything, so you must show what a strong womanly woman you are, by keeping silence and waiting."

In token of compliance she gave me the oval piece of canvas.

"I wonder who punched the holes in it!" she remarked, ruefully. "Who ever it was, they were shockingly disrespectful."

I tried to fancy what she would have said had she known they were bullet holes. Evidently that possibility had not occurred to her and I was glad that it had not.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)